

ATLAS CABLES

Handmade



Scotland, the land where myths and legends are widely circulated. Just take the Loch Ness Monster, does it exist or not...? At the invitation of importer Tophifi and cable manufacturer Atlas Cables, I travel to Kilmarnock to see the manufacturing process with my own eyes and to get to know sales director Martin McCue and managing director Kevin Kelly.

The telephone contact that preceded was pleasant and direct amicable. After a smooth flight and a quick transfer to my hotel, Martin picks me up early the next morning. The drive from Glasgow to Kilmarnock takes about forty minutes and reveals a misty, mysterious Scotland. During the ride, Martin turns out to be one

to be a fantastic guide who tells me all kinds of facts and things worth knowing about Glasgow, the area and of course Kilmarnock. The location of Atlas Cables will mean nothing to many, but it turns out to be the town where the Johnnie Walker whiskey brand originated in the year 1820. For years, Johnnie Walker was the greatest working

giver of the city and surroundings. In 2009, owner Diageo decided to close the establishment and to have production take place elsewhere. In 2012 the last bottles will be filled and about 700 employees will be made redundant. A big blow to the town with all its consequences. The Atlas Cables factory is located on a small industrial estate

the edge of town. Atlas Cables' neighbours, McCallum Bagpipes, are not the least. It is the largest producer and exporter of bagpipes in the world. How Scottish do you want it.

Day program

But back to Atlas Cables, for this we traveled to Kilmarnock. From the outside of the building, nothing suggests that beautiful and high-quality audio cables are made inside. After a quick temperature check, despite the abolished corona measures, people are careful since the small team is relatively vulnerable, and we can enter the building. Immediately upon entering I am enthusiastically greeted by director Kevin Kelly. A genuine Scot with ditto accent, although the Scots, just like the Frisians with us, speak of a language. Kevin leads me to the listening room as he jokingly argues with Martin about who will provide the coffee and tea. It is immediately clear to me that there is a casual atmosphere at Atlas Cables. I immediately feel at ease and look forward to a nice day.

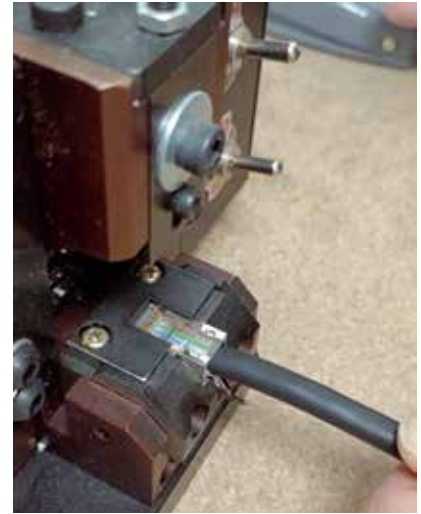
Kevin proposes to go through the daily program. "I first wanted to tell you a few things about the company's history and philosophy together with Martin. Followed by a lunch outside the door. Then when we get back I'll introduce you to some of our team at the factory and you can see for yourself how we build our cables. Then we close the day with an extensive listening session where I can show you the differences between the various cables," says Kevin. A daily schedule that I can certainly agree with.

Origin history

In the 1990s, the British chain Mountain Snow, of about 100 audio shops, was looking for a way to generate additional sales with audio cables that had to offer 'value for money' in various price ranges, in addition to the equipment they sold. John Carrick, a man with long experience in the audio industry, turned out to be the right person and he developed a few different cable lines that proved very successful. In 2003, five dealers took over Atlas Cables and rebranded Atlas Scotland Ltd. fixed. John Carrick kept at it

rudder and the goal that was set was to offer optimal performance within a wide range of products and to be sound-wise cut from the same cloth. In 2010, after a career as an electronics engineer specializing in digital techniques at the well-known audio brand Linn, Kevin came into contact with John Carrick. "I called John because I wanted to use and sell his cables for my own company in Custom Installation. As we were both based in Kilmarnock I thought it would be a good idea to let him know as we might be fishing part of the same pond," says Kevin. "Well, this conversation turned out differently than expected. John responded bluntly and indicated that he was not interested. I persisted with the result that John tacked and agreed to an appointment at the office. After this meeting, instead of a deal to sell Atlas Cables, I came out with an order to develop digital cables for Atlas," says Kevin with a broad smile. "Soon I started doing more and more work for Atlas and I was busy developing various cables full-time." In 2013, Kevin together with Martin and two shareholders acquired Atlas Scotland Ltd. about from John





and things took off in a hurry. The business grew and seven years ago the company moved to its current location.

Philosophy

Contrary to the mystical surrounding Scotland, Atlas Cables work from an engineering point of view. Which means that everything they do must lead to an improvement in display quality. However, it should be easy to explain and repeat. In this case, Kevin does not speak so much of a certain philosophy, but rather of a mission. "We try to transfer as much information as possible from one end of the cable to the other without coloring or affecting the sound. We firmly believe in demonstrating our cables and that the customer then makes the best choice based on their own experience," says Kevin. "For us, there are five parameters that can explain the performance of an audio cable," explains Martin. "Namely: the quality of the conductor, the efficiency of the insulator, quality of the connector, the degree of shielding and, last but not least, the production process." "When a listener hears a difference between two cables, we at Atlas Cables must be able to explain this on technical grounds," Kevin adds. Later in the afternoon during the extensive demo with various cables, they fully live up to this claim. Based on a number of sheets, Kevin and Martin give here

Atlas Cables has been using two different types of copper for twenty years, namely OFC (Oxygen Free Copper) and the even better OCC variant (Ohno Continuous Cast). The conductor used partly explains the price differences between the various cables, the material OCC is about ten times more expensive than the OFC variant. The quality of the insulator used is of great importance for the bandwidth of the cable. This results in a more natural and open sound. Teflon is a good choice to act as an insulator, but there are different variants. Atlas uses Polyethylene, PTFE and Microporous PTFE. The connector is extremely important, which is why Atlas only uses in-house designed ones. Unlike many other cable manufacturers, Atlas works with the 'cold welding' (crimping) technique instead of soldering. "The choice for this technique stems from the use of OCC as the material for the conductor. This material loses quality when 'post processing' is used. In other words, soldering where the OCC conductor is reheated and cooled in an uncontrolled manner. In addition, with these handmade cables we have to deal with different employees who assemble the cables, so every solder joint is different. We use special calibrated tools for crimping so that each cable is identical. This material loses quality when 'post processing' is used. In other words, soldering where the OCC conductor is reheated and cooled in an uncontrolled manner. In addition, with these handmade cables we have to deal with different employees who assemble the cables, so every solder joint is different. We use special calibrated tools for crimping so that each cable is identical.

tics, regardless of who made the cable. In the high-end models, the pin of the plug is the same material as the conductor. We are unique with this level of detail during production", Kevin proudly tells me. A unique feature of Atlas Cables is the Grun Coherent Earthing System. A number of cable types have the option of external grounding. This can be done in different ways, via the earth connection to an amplifier or Eos modular power strip. The best way is via the special plug available as an accessory.

Into the factory

After so much information, it's time for a short break. In a nearby restaurant we have lunch with, how could it be otherwise, a delicious portion of fish





& Potato chips. Completely fresh and fruity again, it is time to visit the factory. When entering the factory, you immediately notice how peaceful it is and how light and clean it is. No noise from machines or anything like that just a modest music in the background. "Our way of producing allowed us to continue to meet the demand for our products during Covid. Employees worked from home and were provided with the necessary materials every week. Because we couldn't place coils of cables with every employee, we purchased a cutting machine that cuts cables from the coil to the desired length with great precision. This way we can produce the runners in the range faster after Covid, what

turned out to be an added benefit. Everything we make has been sold, we work 'Build to Order' and hardly have any stock", says Kevin. "This way of working also ensures that our employees maintain variety in their work. When fully incorporated, they can make 95 different cables. They do this on the basis of 'spec sheets'. This specifies exactly how the relevant cable must be made. The advantage is that if a possible adjustment has been made to, for example, a plug or other material change, they see this immediately and everyone makes the cable in the same way." I can look on the fingers of someone who is concentrating on a Hyper Streaming cable. I understand from her that Streaming-ether-

power cables are the most difficult cables to make, the eight miniscule wires have to be exactly in the right place in the connector. Subsequently, the inner, plastic part of the connector is crimped by machine and the rest of the finish is again handmade. "In order to give our, mainly high-end versions, a customer-specific appearance in addition to superior performance, Atlas Cables has been offering the 'Luxe' finish for some time now. We have entered into a partnership with a company in the region that specializes in leather upholstery for furniture and car interiors. We offer four different colors of leather as standard and the customer can choose a specific stitching and its color. Any color of leather is possible on request, which makes the cable unique. We send the basic cable to the leather processor and get it back with the right sheath. The finishing is then further provided by us; one of our people specializes in this. Shall we take a look there?" asks Kevin.

3D printer

We walk to another corner of the room where, with an eye for detail and great precision, a beautiful cable finished with brown leather and white stitching is fitted with connectors. "The smallest mistake during assembly is enough to reject the end product. In practice, however, this hardly ever happens, our people are highly motivated and show more



than 100% effort", Kevin laughs. "The fact that people are motivated and enjoy working for us has to do with the fact that we try to be a Profitable Sustainable Company. Not only with our products, but also with our people. Of course, as Atlas Cables we have to make a profit, but that is not the main goal of the company for us. Martin and I have no illusion or intention to become millionaires with this. Above all, everyone should feel comfortable with what they are doing. We want to constantly innovate our products, not only in terms of quality, but also in terms of production. By producing more and more parts in-house, or purchasing closer to home, we try to make our contribution to a better living environment. A good example is the purchase of a 3D printer with which we

can produce parts of the connectors in-house. The solid version of PTFE requires a sleeve to control expansion and contraction. For the most expensive Ultra L version, we now print them ourselves and have been able to drastically reduce the mass by using a kind of honeycomb structure and the sleeve is only a cosmetic addition. Together with Strathclyde University, we are now working on a model in which the sleeve and plug form a single unit. The less plug (mass) the more transparent the cable will sound, less weight is less coloring. This might be a nice bridge to listen to the differences in our listening room and then I can show you some parts right away," Kevin suggests. After some photos in the factory where everyone enthusiastically cooperates and a

tour through the, almost empty, warehouse - remember Build to Order?! - we walk towards the listening room.

The ear also wants something

The first thing you notice when entering the listening room is the equipment in the audio rack, or rather not the equipment itself, but the way in which they are placed in the rack. Namely with the back in sight instead of the fronts. Very logical when you consider visiting a cable manufacturer. Kevin and Martin laugh when they see my somewhat surprised look. "Why make it difficult when it can be done easily?" jokes Martin. "The system that is there is also not really exciting, and is regularly subject to change. Currently there is a Musical Fidelity preamp, Naim server, Chord Ultimate power amp, Arcam DAC and



KEVIN KELLY (L) AND MARTIN MCCUE (R)





DALI speakers. The only thing the combination has to do for us is to show the differences between the various cables," says Kevin. Before the listening session, we listen to stereo RCA interlinks between the DAC and the preamplifier. Nothing is changed on the other cabling of the set. "What we are going to do now is something that we hope and promote that our dealers do for their customers. Showing the differences between the various cables and being able to explain them on the basis of the five parameters we talked about earlier. No voodoo or exciting terminology, just common sense. I always grab one track and I play it for about forty seconds, then I play the same piece again. Then I switch, in this case the stereo interlink, and we continue in the same way," says Martin. We start with the Element Achromatic, the affordable entry-level cable from Atlas. The reproduction is fine, nicely balanced and pleasant. Subsequently, the Element is replaced by the Equator Achromatic, basically the same construction and materials, only now Coax with double shielding. Result: a wider stereo image and more cohesion between the instruments.

After this it is the turn of the Hyper Achromatic which has more OCC conductors. This translates into a more lifelike display with more tranquility.

Although the step is larger than between the first two versions, it is more difficult to describe in terms of spatiality or timbre. More involvement with the music is the best description. Price-wise, a big step is now being made towards the Ailsa Achromatic. The Ailsa is about 1.5 times more expensive than the Hyper. The insulator is now PTFE instead of PEF and the shield is copper. All instruments now sound more natural, easier and the music seems to be played more slowly. Although the name Ailsa remains the same, the addition of Ultra instead of Achromatic is what makes the difference. In terms of price, a major step has been taken, with prices around fourteen hundred euros for a 1 meter set, about three times the price of the 'normal' Ailsa. There are plenty of technical differences and it would take too long to explain them all. The ultra plug, multi-core building and Grun Earthing are some of them. The reproduction now sounds much more open, there is more air around the instruments and voices. More mature and more natural are key words to indicate the reproduction. "Look", Kevin says and shows me the inside of the Ultra and Ultra L plug side by side. "This is what we mean by: The less plug, the more transparent the display." The plug is solid where the Ultra has an open structure. He gives me both and even in these small parts the difference is The less plug, the more transparent the display." The plug is solid where the Ultra has an open structure. He gives me both and even in these small parts the difference is The less plug, the more transparent the display." The plug is solid where the Ultra has an open structure. He gives me both and even in these small parts the difference is

clearly felt in weight. Continue with the Mavros Ultra, which features more conductors, twin multi-core, and Grun Earthing System. It is now perfectly audible how the piano is struck and the flute blown. Sarah McLachlan's voice gains even more realism and you can hear her breathing. Finally, the new Arran Ultra L, with the 3D printed interior of the plug, even better shielding and solid OCC copper conductors, can show its trick. This cable takes the reproduction to a very high level. The tranquility that is in the reproduction is beautiful and makes the music flow from the speakers. A cable capable of taking any serious audio set to the next level. Kevin and Martin completely convinced me with this demo.

Quaich

After the extensive demo it is unfortunately time to leave for Glasgow airport. Too bad, as both hosts had a lot more to say about Atlas Cables. The philosophy of making audible differences explicable, from a technical point of view, became completely clear to me during the listening demo. The great thing is that every Atlas dealer can give you the same demo as a customer and explain the differences and even show them with parts and cut-away cables. They don't know any secrets at Atlas in that regard. The lovingly handmade cables sound transparent, the people behind Atlas Cables are warm, open and sincere. This becomes clear when I am offered a Quaich, a traditional Scottish friendship cup, at the cordial farewell. Kevin,

Rene Smith

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